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ABSTRACT

This study of the career paths of 147 Tennessee school superintendents sought to determine to what extent coaching and principalships are routes to that office. The majority of respondents were white males; only one was black, and 10 were female. The data were analyzed by group, race, sex, years in office, and method of selection (elected or appointed). Central tendency statistics and significance tests were used where appropriate. Findings revealed a clearly identifiable path to the superintendency--from coach to principal to central office administrator--with some variation in the particulars of the path, especially for appointed administrators. For instance, appointed female superintendents' career paths differed from those of appointed male superintendents. None had been high school administrators, nor coaches, although almost all had been central office administrators. The results suggest truth to the notion that coaching and high school administration are routes to the superintendency. (JAM)

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CAREER PATH OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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CAREER PATH OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Conventional thinking holds that the way to the superintendent's office is through the high school principalship; and the way to the high school principal's office is through coaching. To what extent is it true that the route to the superintendency involves prior experience as a coach and high school principal? Is this an accurate portrayal of the career path of superintendents or merely a "wags-eye-view" of reality? Is there a career path for superintendents? Do recent office-holders resemble long-standing office-holders in their career profile(s)? Do female superintendents follow the same career path as male superintendents? To answer these and related questions, the present study, Career Path of School Superintendents, was undertaken.

RELATED RESEARCH

Considering the relevance of the questions for the field and for would-be administrators, surprisingly little has been written about the career path of superintendents, and few studies have considered the question over time.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and its

precursor, the National Education Association, Department of Superintendence, has reported on the office of superintendent every decade save one since 1923. In the 1982 report, Cunningham and Hentges studied a sample of 1339 superintendents. They reported that the larger the district (student enrollment), the larger the percentage of superintendents with doctorates, and that in contrast with findings in prior decades, the superintendents studied were younger. The median age for males was 34.5 years, and for females, 41.5 years. Further, they found that they were less likely than in prior decades to have come to the superintendency directly from the principalship (1982, 43% did; 1971, 61% had) or from teaching (1982, 9% did; 1971, 14% had, or to have had coaching experience (1982, 42.3% did; 1972, 79% had).

The AASA report concluded that there was a career path for superintendents and it differed by size of district. The career path in districts of more than 3,000 students was reported to be teacher to principal to central office; in districts of less than 3,000 students, teacher to principal to superintendent.

The authors reported that the number of female superintendents had "changed little in ten years" (p.73), from 1.3% in 1972 to 1.2% in 1982, and that in comparison with their male counterparts, the female superintendents were slightly older, had more years of teaching and more education, more often had served as a supervisor in their first administrative position, entered

their first administrative position at an earlier age, and were more often appointed to their present positions from outside the district.

The AASA reports provide important data about the superintendency above and beyond career path and demographic profiles, and they do so on a systematic basis. Nevertheless, in looking at the questions of career paths and demographics, the failure of the 1982 study to provide data underlying some of the conclusions presented limits the applicability of the findings to the questions being asked in this study.

Other related studies of (or including) superintendents provide relevant information, but add only a little to our knowledge of the career path of superintendents. McCarthy and Zent (1981) included superintendents in their analysis of demographic information about a variety of school administrators. They aggregated the positions of superintendent, assistant and associate superintendent and reported that the mean age for this group was 48.8 years, 90% were Caucasian, they had been in education for an average of 24.9 years, 38% held doctorates, and 58% had been in their position five years or less. Half of the combined superintendents' group had come to their position from either an assistant superintendency (24%) or from another central office administrative position (26%). Twenty-three per cent had come from the principalship, 18% from secondary, and 5% from elementary. While the aggregated group contained both females and

minorities, none of the 46 superintendents included in the group were female.

Young (1984) studied 72 superintendents, 60 male and 12 female. The focus of his study was job satisfaction, not career path, and little demographic data were provided. He reported that male and female superintendents were equally satisfied with their jobs and that the differences between them were small and not significant in terms of mean age (males, 50.12; females, 50.09), total years in education (males, 24.75; females, 26.25), and years of administrative experience (males, 18.35; females 20.16).

McDade and Drake (1982) studied the career path of female superintendents. The basis of their analysis was the notion of career interruptions, which they used with an unidentified number of respondents from the 142 they contacted. They built 6 career paths, 4 with and 2 without interruptions. In reporting these career paths, positions were aggregated and there is no way to distinguish if or what the path included, except in the most generalized terms.

PROCEDURES

Since existing studies did not provide adequate answers to the questions raised in the beginning of the paper, the present study was undertaken. Each of the 140 public school superintendents in the State of Tennessee was sent a survey form requesting

information about their school districts (levels served, student enrollment, teachers, and method of coming to office - elected or appointed), personal data (age, sex, race, place of birth, place/high school attended, degrees, educational preparation), and career path (positions held, chronologically; coaching). A copy of the form appears in Appendix A.

One hundred six superintendents returned the form for a return rate of 76%. The data were analyzed in terms of the questions asked on the form and in the study for the respondents as a group and for identifiable subgroups: female/male; appointed/elected; newer/longer office-holders. Only 1 of the 3 minority superintendents returned the form making it inappropriate to consider race in the analysis.

FINDINGS

Demographic information about incumbent superintendents as a group may be seen in Table 1. Fifty-eight per cent of the respondents were elected and 45%, appointed; 9 superintendents were female, 97 were male. For the group as a whole, the mean age of the superintendent was 48.9 years, but the range was from 34 to 70 years. They had been in office an average of 7 years, but the range went from 0 to 27 years. Twenty-two per cent held doctorates (65% held masters degrees), and they had taught an average of 8.5 years (range: 2 to 25 years). Ninety-two per cent of the superintendents were born, raised and educated in

Table I

DEMOGRAPHICS OF SUPERINTENDENTS

Appointed Superintendents

		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
n=		43	2	45
Age		50.37	41	49.96
Years in Superintendency		7.62	2.5	7.39
Years in Teaching		8.5	10.5	8.59
Native	Yes	19	2	21
	No	24	0	24
Highest Degree Earned	MS	25	2	27
	EdS	3	0	3
	EdD/ PhD	15	0	15

Elected Superintendents

		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
n=		54	7	61
Age		48.62	43.57	48.13
Years in Superintendency		7.1	4.9	6.78
Years in Teaching		7.64	11.57	8.29
Native	Yes	38	5	43
	No	16	2	18
Highest Degree Earned	MS	41	1	42
	EdS	10	2	12
	EdD/ PhD	3	4	7

Table I (cont.)

All Superintendents

		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
n=		97	9	106
Age		49.36	43	48.87
Years in Superintendency		7.3	4.4	7
Years in Teaching		8.15	11.33	8.52
Native	Yes	57	7	64
	No	40	2	42
Highest Degree Earned	MS	66	3	69
	EdS	13	2	15
	EdD/ PhD	18	4	22

Tennessee, and 76% were serving as superintendents in the county in which they were born and raised or in a contiguous county. Almost 10% more were from nearby counties.

Sixty percent of the current superintendents began their administrative careers as principals. Twenty-eight percent began as high school principals, 28% as elementary principals and 4% as middle school principals. Eight percent respectively began as high school assistant principals and central office supervisors. The remaining 28% was divided among five positions.

The majority of the respondents came to the superintendency from a principalship (45%), most often in the high school (54% of those coming from a principalship). Sixteen percent came from central office supervisory positions and 16% came from a superintendency or assistant superintendency.

There were 13 different career paths for the 106 superintendents, but the majority fell into one of three paths: teacher to principal to superintendent (45%); teacher to principal to central office to superintendent (21.7%); teacher to superintendent (10.4%). Clearly the dominant path was teacher-principal-superintendent. It is noteworthy that in systems with a high school (n=93), 61 of the superintendents had been high school principals at some time before becoming superintendents.

While the data did not in general suggest differences between

elected and appointed superintendents in terms of age, years in office, teaching background, subjects taught, years taught, or coaching, a smaller percentage of elected than appointed superintendents had doctorates (11.5% versus 33.3%) and came from a prior position as superintendents or assistant superintendents (5% versus 29%); and a larger percentage had come to the superintendency from a central office supervisory position (20% versus 11%) or with no prior administrative experience (11% versus 4%).

Sixty-two percent of the superintendents had coached interscholastic athletics. When only male superintendents were considered that figure rose to 68%. Only 40 of the 106 superintendents had not coached and 9 of these were the female superintendents.

In analyzing the data it became clear that gender, rather than any other characteristic, was a differentiating factor within the superintendency. Female and male superintendents differed markedly from one another demographically and in terms of career path. This was not true when method of coming to office (elected/appointed) or years in office (newer/longer) were used in analyzing the data. When these factors were considered, except as already noted, the differences were few or nonexistent.

Demographically, female superintendents in Tennessee were younger (average age 43 versus 48.9), had fewer years in the position

(average 4.4 years versus 7.3 years), fewer years of administrative experience (5.38 years versus 8.35 years), and had taught longer (average 11.3 years versus 8.15 years), than their male counter-parts. Forty-four per cent of female superintendents held doctorates versus 19% of male superintendents. Seventy-eight per cent of the female superintendents were elected to the superintendency and 22% were appointed. The appointed superintendents held the position in school districts serving only kindergarten through grade six. All of the female superintendents were born and raised in-state, and 78% were serving in the counties in which they were born and raised or in a contiguous or nearby one.

When compared to male superintendents, both elected and appointed female superintendents were more likely to have taught in elementary school and to have come to the superintendency from the elementary school principalship. Only one of the 9 female superintendents had been a high school principal, and none had been an assistant principal. Further, none of them had coached.

The career paths of female superintendents tended to differ from those of male superintendents. The dominant career paths for female superintendents were equally divided between: teacher to central office supervisor to superintendent (33.3%); teacher to central office supervisor to principal to superintendent (33.3%); teacher to elementary principal or assistant principal to superintendent (33.3%). Unlike males, females tended to begin

their administrative careers as central office supervisors (66.7%). Like males, a majority (66.7%) had served as principal at some time in their careers but, only one had served as a high school principal.

DISCUSSION

Is conventional wisdom correct? Is the way to the superintendent's office through the high school principalship and from coaching? On the basis of this study of incumbent Tennessee superintendents, the answer is yes ---if you are **male**; no ---if you are **female**. The route to the top appears to be defined by the sex of the aspirant and sex is a far more influential factor in the determination of superintendent career path than method of coming to office (elected/appointed) or time in office (newer/longer office-holders). If conventional wisdom bears any relation to past reality, there appears to be little (not no) change either in the way male aspirants prepare for moving into the top spot or else the factors which influence their selection.

Tennessee is only one of six states that still has both elected and appointed superintendents. Fifty-five per cent of the superintendents in the state are elected. Long-standing criticism of elected superintendents revolves around concerns for politicalization of the position and the possibility, if not the likelihood, of less qualified or unqualified persons (as compared to appointed superintendents) becoming superintendent.

The elected superintendents in our study did not differ in any major ways from the appointed superintendents in terms of age, administrative experience, teaching background or experience; And in terms of the conventional career path requirements, i.e., coaching and high school principal, they were like their appointed counterparts.

Few females hold superintendent positions. Cunningham and Hentges (1982) reported that fewer than 2% of the superintendents in the nation were female and that there had been little change in that percentage in the last decade. Recent studies of change in line positions in the forty-four largest (student enrollment) school districts in the nation (Mertz, Venditti,and McNeely, 1988) and in varied type school districts, urban, suburban, medium-city, and rural (Mertz and McNeely, 1987) suggest that the number of females in line positions, in particular, high school and middle school principals and assistant principals, and assistant superintendents and superintendents, is increasing. The increases are extremely small, but nonetheless evident. It is to be anticipated that the number of female superintendents will continue to increase, and that the study by AASA in 1992 or so, will reflect both this increase and the divergent career path of male and female superintendents.

The fact that the majority of incumbent female superintendents in Tennessee are elected rather than appointed suggests that at least for females, the preferred professional route, appointment,

is less likely to be a means for coming to the superintendency than the less preferred route, election. Election appears more accessible to females than appointment. If the findings of this study that females follow a different career path than males holds true beyond the sample studied, and it may not, the failure of females to follow the dominant career path may be a serious impediment to their advancement to the top spot in appointed superintendencies. The importance of coaching and high school principal positions in the career path of male superintendents suggests the perceived importance of these experiences in the superintendent selection process. Unless the criteria used change, the fact that few females have been/get to be high school principals, no less interscholastic coaches, may be a factor in their failure to make greater progress in winning appointment as superintendents.

Much has been said and written about change in schools, particularly about leadership---needed and achieved. If change has occurred in schools, one place in which it should be seen is in the selection of administrators, including superintendents. Nothing in the data collected about Tennessee superintendents suggests that there has been much change in the selection or election criteria used.

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